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PHASES OF THE COMMERCIAL SPIRIT

Bryce, in his "American Commonwealth," in speaking of Thomas Jefferson's fear of commerce, says (Vol. II, p. 32, note): "Jefferson regarded agriculture as so much the best occupation for citizens that he was alarmed by the rumor that the codfish of the Northeastern coasts were coming down to the shores of Virginia and Carolina, lest the people of those states should be tempted to catch them, and commerce, of which we already have too much, receive an accession." This fear of commerce and of the commercial spirit crops out not infrequently in Jefferson's writings. In a letter to John Langdon, written in 1810, he says: "Money, and not morality, is the principle of commerce and commercial nations." He declares elsewhere, however, that the imputation that he was an enemy to commerce was unfounded, and says that "as the handmaid of agriculture, commerce will be cherished by me both from principle and duty."

In fact, commerce and the spirit of commerce are to-day probably regarded with more friendliness by the philosophers of the world than in any former period of history. Though, as Jefferson says, money, and not morality, is the object of commerce, yet wealth is now as never before regarded as one of the legitimate ends either of an individual or a nation. The contempt with which the ancient philosopher looked upon the pursuit of wealth is now hardly to be found at all. In the eighteenth century a great science, which treats of *wealth* itself, sprang into existence; and, though so new, is recognized as one of the most useful of those social sciences that have for their object the welfare of mankind. Wealth, while far from being the only good thing, is nevertheless pronounced *good*, inasmuch as it gives people leisure for culture and enables them to do much for the happiness of others. No one would now question that commerce, instead of being forbidden as it was in Sparta, should be fostered by every government. Buckle, in his "History of Civilization," very well says that "among the accessories of modern civilization, there is none of greater moment than trade,

the spread of which has probably done more than any other single agent to increase the comfort and happiness of mankind" (p. 201). Trade does not of necessity consist in trying to beggar your neighbor. The exchange is frequently useful to both parties; for, as has been said, it amounts in many cases, to "giving what we do not want in return for what we do want."

Unfortunately, however, every trade is not a fair and square exchange. The average man in trade seems possessed with the desire to get the better of any trade in which he is concerned. He can hardly appreciate the feeling of the Southern planter, who said he hoped never to drive a good bargain, as it meant that the other man would be worsted.

Ninety-nine men out of a hundred, whether or not they particularly desire to be wise, would like to be healthy and wealthy. It seems a little singular that such a philosopher as Benjamin Franklin should have classed wealth, with health and wisdom, as one of the desirable things to be secured by early rising. But while Franklin, with his great fund of practical sense, had a full appreciation of wealth and its uses; it never caused him to lose sight of other far more important things. He had a mind entirely too sound and well balanced to have been at any stage of his life carried away by the commercial spirit. Though, with his remarkable genius for business, he had many opportunities of growing wealthy, he kept the gathering of money strictly subordinate to other and worthier ends.

Lord Bacon also took the view that it was not the part of wisdom to hold wealth in contempt. In his Essay on "Riches," he says: "Seeke not proud riches, but such as thou maist get justly, use soberly, distribute cheerfully, and leave contentedly. Yet have no abstract nor friarly contempt of them."

There are probably very few in this age who would agree with Pascal that poverty is among the chief of blessings. Poverty is a comparative term, and when spoken of as a blessing is generally used to denote merely, "a condition below that of easy, comfortable living." That degree of poverty which exacts of a man all his energies and all his waking time in order to furnish him with the bare necessities of life can hardly be otherwise than blighting in its effects. What we speak of as poverty might

seem wonderful affluence to a poor savage. Even the poorest of the poor in civilized communities live in a state of greatest comfort and luxury compared with the condition of human beings in the uncivilized portions of the world.

A certain degree of wealth, then, should be sought both by individuals and nations. It is almost a truism that there can be no culture without some leisure. Up to a certain point the pursuit of money is not only not ignoble but a duty. It is not an easy matter, however, to decide how far this pursuit should be carried. It is said that Emerson, when his income reached twelve hundred dollars a year, deliberately declined to make any effort to increase it, for the reason that there were other things more worthy of his efforts. It is on record that Spinoza deemed it his duty for years to live on five cents a day, in order that he might devote all his time and energies to his great life work.

But while the accumulation of money up to a certain point is to be encouraged, its pursuit beyond that point seems almost invariably, in the case either of an individual or of a whole people, to result in deterioration. "What a cruel reflection," says Jefferson, "that a rich country cannot long be a free one." As to the effect of wealth on the individual, "John Wesley remarked in early life that he had known but four men who had not declined in religion by becoming wealthy; at a later period he corrected the remark, and made no exception." — (Stevens' "Methodism").

Is not such deterioration, however, due to the fact that in our present state of civilization and culture, very few understand the proper uses of wealth? If every citizen could be educated up to the point of being made to realize that wealth should be used for the advancement of science and the arts and generally to promote human welfare, what a glorious thing wealth would be!

To educate people generally to put the true value on wealth would be no simple task. The thoroughly and properly educated mind may see clearly that the greatest happiness lies along the line of plain living and high thinking — but what hope is there of impressing the masses with this idea?

Almost the first thing that strikes the cultivated foreigner who lands in the United States is the prevailing worship of

wealth that he finds on every side. To a greater extent here than anywhere wealth means power, and this renders the fight for higher things doubly difficult. The commercial spirit is probably more widely diffused in this country and has a more controlling influence than it has ever attained before. If it is not regulated or curbed in some way it is not easy to say whither it may lead us. It is not that the commercial spirit is not needed, but that this country is at present too much dominated by it.

The existing mania for wealth *must* be combatted in some way. When it has gone so far that such a man as Mr. Mark Hanna felt that he was justified in calling Mr. Rockefeller "money-crazy," it is time that we should stop and think.

As long as a considerable element of a nation are money-crazy, so long will there be embezzlement and other forms of fraud. Any man who puts a higher value on wealth than on virtue—who would rather be rich than honest—will not hesitate to defraud his neighbors, if he thinks he can do so without being punished. The recent disclosures of fraud in public office and in various business concerns lead to the conclusion that we have in this country a pretty large number of citizens who have become monomaniacs on the subject of money.

This species of monomania seems to cause the subject to confuse wealth with prosperity. From this point of view the man or nation possessed of the greatest wealth is the most prosperous. But what is "Prosperity?" Martin Luther said that the prosperity of a country "consists in the number of its cultivated citizens, in its men of education, enlightenment and character." In somewhat the same strain William Ellery Channing declared that "the great distinction of a nation—the only one worth possessing, and which brings after it all other blessings—is the prevalence of pure principles among the citizens."

Of the ancient countries, Sparta was one of the least wealthy and Carthage one of the richest. One represented the commercial spirit, and the other, the spirit that holds commercialism in contempt. There can be no question as to which left the richer heritage to future times. Athens in the very height of her splendor, if compared with New York, would seem an almost

poverty stricken community But what a galaxy of immortals in art, literature and philosophy has Athens left us! And how many New Yorkers of to-day will be living forces in history twenty centuries hence? It is to be feared that New York comes much nearer being a modern Carthage than a modern Athens. The fact that some other spirit than that of commerce has prevailed in Scotland explains her greatness. Dr. Jonson seemed to enjoy ridiculing her poverty to Boswell. But this small and naturally barren country has attained a pre-eminence in the world of thought far above that of some of the great commercial nations of the world.

The only way, it seems, to prevent the commercial spirit in this country from sweeping everything before it lies in the direction of culture. It is by higher education alone that this spirit can be successfully resisted. As culture is more widely diffused through the increase in extent and number of the great institutions of learning throughout the land, there will go forth a constantly increasing number of young men impressed with the idea that true wealth consists not in the accumulation of money, but in the accumulation of great ideas; that it consists in that elevation and reach of thought which enable a man to draw abundantly from nature and from the great minds of the past and present the highest and most permanent of pleasures.

The man of little culture easily loses his bearings. It is perfectly natural that a person of scant education, but of unusual business ability, should look upon money-getting as the chief aim in life. As he proceeds towards this end, however, his nature too often becomes poorer and more dwarfed, and he winds up his career, perhaps, very rich in the world's goods and yet a pitiable failure. Mr. Andrew Carnegie is one of the few, who, after accumulating an immense fortune by his own individual efforts, seems finally to have waked up to the fact that a man who has devoted himself merely to the gathering of great wealth was a disgrace to society. For some years past he seems to have made an earnest struggle to prevent his life from being a failure.

When Mr. Carnegie, however, recently declared his belief that poverty "is the best heritage of all," he probably had in mind

instances, such as all of us can recall, where the want of money has proved a spur to some vigorous nature. Such a battle with poverty does not generally result from a love of money, but from a sense of duty, and the struggle is strengthening and uplifting. The desire for wealth has, of course, different effects on different natures. When moderate and kept within bounds it is commonly an incentive to honest work, and in so far as it helps to overcome sloth, which Edmund Burke pronounced the Master Vice, it must be agreed that it is not to be condemned.

A good many thinkers, realizing that it is the need of money that keeps a large portion of the civilized world employed, reach the conclusion that the accumulation of wealth, having taken away from the possessor the incentive for work, must result in idleness and all its attendant evils. But this seems to be rather an unnecessarily gloomy view. Taking the case of any individual and his descendants, where the founder of the family under the spur of poverty has grown opulent, it suggests the never-ending circle of poverty, industry, wealth, idleness, waste, the consequent return to poverty, and so on.

This view seems to fail to take into consideration that there are many incentives to work besides poverty. In fact, most of the best work that is done at all is the result of some other motive than the getting of money. It would be hard to call to mind any great man who has been controlled or dominated by the commercial spirit. Was there ever a great scholar, or scientist, who was spurred to his best efforts by a desire for money? Wealth or lack of wealth is not a matter of great importance to men of this type. If they are poor, they deny themselves in order that they may carry on that work which they think has been given them to do. If they are rich, they nevertheless work, although they could be idle, because they are animated by the same spirit that urges on their poverty stricken brothers — the love of truth.

It would be well if wealth could be bestowed on all those who are impelled to work by some higher motive than the love of gain. It is unfortunate that such men in their efforts to promote the general good should be hampered by poverty. On the other hand it is always to be deplored when wealth falls to the lot of one, who, though a worker, works only to increase his fortune,

and use the power that money gives to oppress and crush others. Wealth is unquestionably greatly to be desired, if it is to be put to the proper uses; and one of the chief ends of education should be to teach what these uses are.

The Duke of Argyle in his "Reign of Law" speaks of "the one great error of ancient systems of political philosophy — that the natural desire of men for the accumulation of wealth is an evil to be dreaded and repressed." Is not this stating the case rather too strongly against the ancients? It is clear enough that no effort should be made to stamp out entirely this natural desire, yet it is certainly something to be dreaded and restrained. The commercial spirit cries too constantly to one of whom it has taken possession. "Put money in thy purse." Those possessed often become so completely subject to it that they hear no other voice. When a whole community becomes possessed, the man who has the power of accumulating a vast fortune is absurdly overestimated. People in their adoration of wealth forget that certain qualities which are considered detestable in social life — such, for example, as excessive greed and voracity — are not infrequently accountable for these amazing accumulations of property. The most wonderful of these money-getters are often shrewd, grasping men, with consciences that permit them to push their schemes as far as the criminal law allows. We need men of business ability, but men of the type of many of the founders of the colossal fortunes of to-day can hardly be regarded as a blessing.

Education should seek to replace the worship of wealth and the wealth that prevails at present in some of our leading business centres by an appreciation of men of a different order. The populace, generally speaking, have very little idea of who are their real benefactors. The man of affairs who is much in the public eye, is rarely underrated by them, while the quiet scholar seems to them scarcely deserving of notice, much less of honor. Wendell Phillips was a man of no ordinary acquirements, and yet the principal object of one of his best known lectures was to prove the uselessness of the scholar in the Republic. Walter Bagehot, in his "Physics and Politics" (p. 186), shows a much clearer insight into the matter. "If it had not been for quiet

people," says he, "who sat still and studied the sections of the cone, if other quiet people had not sat still and worked out the doctrine of chances, the most dreamy moonshine, as the purely practical mind would consider of all human pursuits; if idle stargazers had not watched long and carefully the motions of the heavenly bodies our modern astronomy would have been impossible, and without our astronomy, our ships, our colonies, our seamen, all which makes modern life could not have existed. . . . And nine-tenths of our modern science is in this respect the same; it is the produce of men whom their contemporaries thought dreamers, who were laughed at for caring for what did not concern them, who, as the proverb went, 'walked into a well from gazing at the stars,' who were believed to be useless if any could be such. And the conclusion is plain that if there had been more such people, if the world had not laughed at those there were, if rather it had encouraged them, there would have been a great accumulation of proved science before there was."

No state could expend its funds in a better way than in the support and encouragement of men of this character. Of how much greater value to a country, for instance, are its great inventors than the shrewd business men who are usually the immediate beneficiaries of the inventions! And yet, if it were proposed to levy a tax upon the wealth of a state for the establishment of an institution for the advancement of science, possibly some of those who would cry out most lustily against the hardship of such tax would be millionaires whose fortunes could be directly traced to the discoveries of some great scientist, who, perhaps, had died in destitution.

Germany of all modern nations seems to have realized most fully the need of fostering work of men of the highest intellectual type. A people, according to Demosthenes, should be judged by the character of the men it crowns, and in Germany the finest intellects are probably accorded a greater share of honor and respect than in any other country in the world. Men who occupy chairs in their great universities are not over-burdened with the work of teaching, but are allowed time for original research. The immense strides made by Germany in every

direction in the last two centuries is the result almost entirely of her appreciation of the value of higher education. Her commercial interests have not been neglected. On the contrary, they have been wonderfully advanced, but they have been kept in subordination to other higher interests.

Although in the United States the unprecedented accumulation of great fortunes within the past three or four decades has been viewed with alarm by a large proportion of the best element of the country, there seems to have been recently an awakening to the need of the spread of higher education. The increase in the number and amount of the gifts made by wealthy men to institutions of higher learning in the last few years has been most encouraging. Mr. Carnegie's gift of ten million dollars for the establishment of a great institution for research at Washington seems to have been along the right line.

In this direction, it would seem, lies the chief hope of this country. The average student of history is apt to take the view that after this nation reaches a certain point of affluence, decay will set in, and it will go the way of the great countries of former times. But the prospects of keeping the commercial spirit within proper bounds are better now than ever before in the world's history, for the simple reason that it is possible now as it never was before to reach all classes by education of the higher sort,—that is to say, the education that teaches people to think wisely and live well. There is certainly a great need throughout the country for institutions that send forth men possessed of sufficient knowledge and skill to enable them to lead successful careers as artisans, agriculturists, or financiers. But there is a still greater need of institutions that will give to the nation men whose lives are to be consecrated to the highest intellectual pursuits, and whose efforts will result in the spread of a broad culture and in a more general appreciation of the best work in literature, art and philosophy.

As the progress of the natural sciences lightens the burden of gaining a livelihood, there will be, of course, an increase in the number of those in the laboring and mechanic classes who will have the leisure to devote themselves to the higher studies. If we believe that the advances of science will continue to add

to the leisure of mankind in general, and that the spread of culture will increase in people the desire to devote this leisure to noble purposes, we can put full faith in Darwin's prediction that at some time in the future there will be on this planet a much happier and more nearly perfect race than we have at present.

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